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Author(s): Aaron Shaffer

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A NEW MUSICAL TERM IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN MUSIC

By AARON SHAFFER

For Oliver Gurney on his 70th birthday

70 u₄-meš gid₂-da-meš

80 ši-bu-tu₂

90 lit-tu-tu₄

STT II, 400 r. 46 ff.

The fragment of Mesopotamian music lexicography published here was identified in the tablet collection of the Babylonian Section of the University Museum, Philadelphia, during a search for certain Sumerian literary fragments.¹ It is offered to Oliver Gurney since it supplements the text of *Nabnitu* XXXII of whose major source he is the copyist and pioneer decipherer.² Furthermore, the new musical term revealed by the text here may have a bearing on the treatise for the tuning of the Babylonian harp published by Professor Gurney in a previous number of this journal.³

N 4782 is a fragment of a one column tablet. Herewith the text, with the parallel lines of U 3011, the primary manuscript of *Nabnitu* XXXII in parentheses:

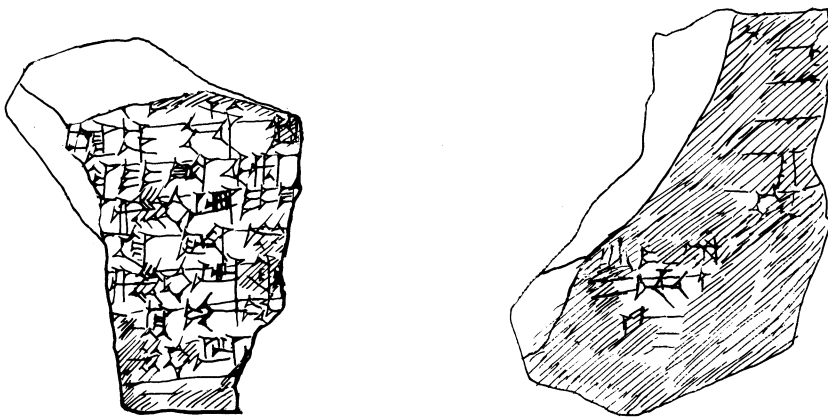


Fig. 1. N 4782 obv. N 4782 rev.

¹ I am grateful to the curators of the collection, Profs. Sjöberg and Leichty, for permission to publish the fragment.

² = U 3011, published as no. 126 in *Ur Excavation Texts (UET)* 7 (1974).

³ "An Old Babylonian Treatise on the Tuning of

the Harp", *Iraq* 30 (1968), 229-233; see also D. Wulstan, *ibid.*, 215-228, and H.-M. Kümmel, *Orientalia* n.s. 39 (1970), 252-263. A comprehensive and reasoned interpretative survey of Mesopotamian and Ancient Near Eastern music is given by A. D. Kilmer in *PAPS* 115 (1971), 131-149.

obverse

	Sumerian column	Akkadian column
1' (i 8)	[x x x x x]	š[i]-n[i] u[h ₂ -re-em]
2' (i 9)	[x x x x]-la	uh ₂ -ru-[um]
3' (i 12)	[x x]-sa ₂	i-ša-ar-[tum]
4' (i 13)	[x x x x x]	si ₂ -hi-ip i-š[a-ar-ti-im]
5' (i 14)	[x x x x x]	ki-it-mu-[um]
6' (i 15)	[x x x x x]	si ₂ -hi-ip ki-i[t-mi-im]
7' (i 16)	[x x x x x]	en-bu-bu-[um]
8' (i 17)	[x x x x x]	s[i ₂ -hi-ip e[n-bu-bi-im]

reverse

	Sumerian column	Akkadian column
1'-4'	broken or undeciphered traces	
5'	[x x x x x]	x x x] a [x x]
6'	[x x x x x]	x x x] hi-x [x]
7'	[x x x x x]	x x x x x]
8'	[x x ^g šal]-gar	x x [x x x]
9'	[x x x x]x	ti-x-[x x x]
10'	[x x x x]x	[x x x x x]

rest broken

This fragment is probably the oldest extant manuscript of the series *Nabnitu*. It is to be dated to the Old Babylonian period, *c.* 1750 B.C., by criteria of palaeography and orthography. The script is middle Old Babylonian cursive. Note especially the forms of LA (obv. 2'), UH₂ (obv. 2'), ŠA (obv. 3'), HI (obv. 4', 6', 8'), BU (obv. 7'), and GAR (rev. 8').⁴ The other signs of the fragment are equally Old Babylonian in form, and while some can be adduced in like form from later periods (especially in archaizing lapidary hands), the signs taken together as a coherent group are comfortably Old Babylonian.

Orthographic features of the text also support this conclusion. The use of ZI for /si/ in *sihip* (obv. 4', 6', 8') is characteristic for Old Babylonian and earlier syllabaries,⁵ although it can be adduced for Middle Babylonian, usually in peripheral dialects.⁶ Likewise, the use of UH₂, though occurring later in esoteric or archaizing contexts,⁷ is most typical for the Old Babylonian and earlier periods.

The vocabulary is not decisive, but one can point out that the form *enbūbum*,

⁴ For LA cf. C. Fossey, *Manuel d'assyriologie* 2, 2905 (Poebel, *BE* 6/2 44: 6, Samsuiluna 14); for UH₂, cf. *ibid.* 25620 (Poebel, *BE* 6/2 23: 30, Samsuiluna 4) and other forms there of the same and earlier periods; for ŠA, cf. *ibid.* 23436 (Thureau-Dangin, *TCL* I 133:4, Samsuiluna 11); for HI, cf. Poebel, *op. cit.* 12:29 (Hammurapi 42), and 41:4 (Samsuiluna 13); for BU cf. Fossey, *op. cit.* 24491 (Poebel, *BE* 6/2 12: 25, Hammurapi 42), 24495 (Poebel, *ibid.* 55:4, Samsuiluna 21) and earlier forms cited there;

for GAR cf. Fossey, *op. cit.* 34522 (Poebel, *BE* 6/2 23:12, Samsuiluna 4); the RU (obv. 2') is incomplete but the traces can be compared with forms from the time of Hammurapi and Samsuiluna given in Fossey, *op. cit.* especially 4400, 4407 and 4417.

⁵ Cf. A. Goetze, *RA* 52 (1958), 137-149.

⁶ Cf. *An. Or.* 42³ n. 59, p. 12 top.

⁷ For example, the Middle Babylonian glass formula text, cf. *An. Or.* 42³ n. 225, p. 44.

together with *ebbūbum*, has an earlier distribution than *embūbum* which occurs later.⁸

As a comparison of N 4782 obv. 4' with U 3011 i 13 shows, the accepted reading of the latter, *titūr išartim*, is erroneous and is to be corrected to *sihip išartim*. In fact, this is actually the reading of U 3011, viz. *ṣiṭ-ḥiṭ-ip!*, as determined by collation.⁹ For the rest, N 4782 duplicates and completes the fixed sequence of *išartum—kitmum—embūbum*, showing that the latter is to be restored in U 3011 i 16–17. More significantly N 4782 reveals a new musical term, *sihpum*, as in *sihip i[išartim]* (obv. 4'), *sihip kitm[im]* (obv. 6') and *sihip e[nbūbim]* (obv. 8').

The reverse of N 4782 is almost entirely destroyed except for isolated traces and signs. This makes placing the reverse within the context of *Nabnitu XXXII* difficult. However, the GAR in l. 8' may indicate that the reverse of N 4782 duplicates U 3011 ii in the *ḡal-gar* section. The position of the GAR, to judge by the thickness of the piece and compared with the spacing of the better preserved obverse, places it where it should be if it were at the right side of the Sumerian column.

Clearly, the most important contribution of N 4782 is the introduction of the term *sihpum* into the discussion of Mesopotamian and Ancient Near Eastern music. Based solely on N 4782 it would be impossible to determine the initial sibilant of *sihpum* with certainty, because of the ambiguities of Old Babylonian sibilant orthography. However, the collation of U 3011 i 13, noted above, eliminates this ambiguity.

It would be reasonable to consider *sihpum* as a nominal derivative of *sahāpum* “to throw down, cover, overturn,” but none of the known meanings of this noun, abstract or concrete seem suitable.¹⁰ It is clear, however, that in the context here *sihpum* must refer to a musical constant which can be applied to the series of modes/intervals termed *išartum—kitmum—embūbum*. This can be seen from the listing of each mode/interval followed by its *sihpum*, thus:

išartum—sihip išartim (3'–4')
kitmum—sihip kitmim (5'–6')
embūbum—sihip enbūbim (7'–8')

This systematic juxtaposition induces one to consider the possibility that the text means “interval—*inversion* of the interval”. This insight, if so it is, or at least the verb involved here, *sahāpum*, can perhaps be applied to another Old Babylonian music text, U 7/80, instructions for the tuning of the harp.¹¹ This text contains instructions in quatrains for changing the mode/interval of the harp from *embūbum* through *kitmum* to *išartum* and back, as, for example, in the following two sets:

⁸ It must be admitted that the Old Babylonian treatise for the tuning of the harp uses *embūbum* (see below); nevertheless, the distribution described still holds.

⁹ The reading *ṣiṭ-ḥiṭ-ur* resulted from the interpretation of damaged signs and was questioned by AHW 1363^b (6). The tablets itself has been returned to Baghdad and could not be consulted by the present

writer. However, a collation was successfully effected by means of an outstanding transparency of the tablet provided by A. D. Kilmer in Berkeley in November, 1977.

¹⁰ AHW 1034^a, “Überdeckung, Gesamtfläche; ein Strauch”.

¹¹ Cf. n. 3 above; the copy is republished as no. 74 in UET 7.

- ii 4' *šumma sa[mmûm embûbumma]* "if the har[p (is tuned) as *e*., and]
 5' *kitmum [lā zaku]* the *k*. [is not clear],
 6' *rebê uhrēm [tēnīma]* [if you alter] the 6th ("4th rear" sc. string)
 7' *kitmum* 1[Z-X-X-X] then the *k*. will [. . .]."
- ii 8' *šumma sammûm k[itumma]* "if the harp (is tuned) as *k*., and
 9' *išartum lā ZA-[ka-at]* the *i*. is not c[lear],
 10' *šamūsam u uhrā [m¹² tēnīma]* [if you alter] the 2nd and 9th ("rear" sc. string)
 11' *išartum* 1Z-ZA-[X-X] then the *i*. will . . . [. . .]."

The restorations of *zaku* (5'), *zakât* (9') and *tēnīma* (6', 10') are based on corresponding but not identical sections of the text;¹³ however these readings are not certain. For the verb in 7' and 11' both *izzaz*, "will stand", and *izzakku*, "will become clear" have been suggested.¹⁴ In view of the revelation offered by N 4782 regarding the modes/intervals and their *sihpum*, it is here proposed to derive a restoration in lines 7' and 11' from *sahāpum* in its sense of "to overturn"¹⁵ applied in this context as "to invert" and read in 7' and 10' respectively, *kitmum/išartum i[s-sa₃-ha-ap]/is-sa₃-[ha-ap]*, "the *k*./*i*. will be inverted". It is to be hoped that musicologists interested in the history of music and musical theory will take up the matter at this point and consider *sihpum* and its possible implications.

In conclusion, attention is drawn to Sumerian contexts referring to music which contain equivalents of *sihpum/sahāpum*, specifically Sumerian *su₂*.¹⁶ In the self-laudation of King Šulgi, *Šulgi B*, in the section dealing with his knowledge of music and his skill with musical instruments, the king claims,

zi-zi-i šu₂-šu₂-ba giš mu-e-hur-hur¹⁷

"I formulated all the rules for both 'rising/raising' and 'overturning/throwing down' [the scale? pitch? interval?]."

The same technical term occurs in *Šulgi E* in a like context,

zi-zi-i šu₂-šu₂ tigi-za-am-za-am-ma-ka ki bi₂-zu-zu-a¹⁸

"On the *tigi* and *zamzam* instruments I know each position for 'rising/raising' and 'overturning/throwing down',

¹² *uhrām* is normalized from *uh₃-ri-a-a[m]*; I take such writings as a sort of *q^{re} perpetuum* of Old Babylonian orthography whereby an old, uncontracted form such as *uhri'am* (or *uhri'am*) is combined in writing with a living, uncontracted literary form *uhrām*, where the contracted vowel length is clearly represented by the *-a-am* sequence. That is, the word is written with the shell of its older form but with the vowels of its living literary form. Several lines above, in line 6', the scribe rather inconsistently simply wrote a spoken form *uhrēm* (adverbial accusative). This *q^{re} perpetuum* can be clearly demonstrated by comparing the various copies found *in situ* of the great Yahdunlim foundation inscription, where some 'archaizing' exemplars are written in the 'ra-bi-

a-am' style, while other 'modernizing' exemplars give 'ra-ba-am' spellings; cf. G. Dossin, *Syria* 32 (1955), 1 ff., and 'apparat critique', 18 ff.

¹³ 18': *za-ku-ta-am*; 19': *te-ni-ma*.

¹⁴ The first by Gurney, *Iraq* 30 (1968), 230; the second by Kümmel, *Orientalia* n.s. 39 (1970), 255, n. 3.

¹⁵ *AHW*, 1004^b (8).

¹⁶ *ŠL* 545 18, 19, 42 f.

¹⁷ *Šulgi B* 161, text from MS. of G. Haayer, courtesy of The Sumerian Dictionary, University Museum, Philadelphia; cf. *Studi Semitici*, 42, 46.

¹⁸ *Šulgi E* 34, var. *šu₄-šu₄*, text from MS. of J. Klein, courtesy of The Sumerian Dictionary, University Museum, Philadelphia.

and in the similar *Šulgi C*,

zi-zi-i šu₂-šu₂-bi in-ga-zu¹⁹

“ I also know both ‘ rising/raising ’ and ‘ overturning/throwing down ’ (on the *si-ezen* and *šu-kara* instruments in order to play them faultlessly) ”.

The same word for “ overturning, throwing down, lowering ”, šu₂, also forms part of the term *ki-šu₂*, which comes at the end of certain compositions and seems to indicate the descending coda and finale.²⁰

¹⁹ *Šulgi C* (b) 78’; var. šu₄-šu₄ here, as in the variant quoted above in note 3, is a non-phonemic ‘ homophonic ’ variant; text from MS. of J. Klein as above.

²⁰ Cf. J. Krecher, *SKly* 22, 30, with previous literature. It may be noted in passing that the Akkadian equivalent of this term, *kilum*, “ finale ”, ought to be separated from its apparent homophone *kilum*, “ imprisonment ”, and not lumped together as *AHw* 476 and *CAD* κ 369. On Comparative Semitic grounds the etymon of the former is **kly* while the latter’s is **kl’*. The separation of the two

verbs in Akkadian, *kalûm* (**kly*), “ to cease ”, and *kalûm* (**kl’*), “ to detain ”, on other than semantic grounds is difficult, if only because of the *a*-vowel of the ventive morpheme. However, semantic considerations suffice in spite of some crossing-over in the vocabularies. In Hebrew some slight falling together or orthographic confusion occurs (cf. M. Held, *JCS* 15 (1961), 19), but in Ugaritic both verbs are distinct (cf. J. Aistleitner, *Wörterbuch der Ugaritischen Sprache*, n. 1311 and n. 1317).